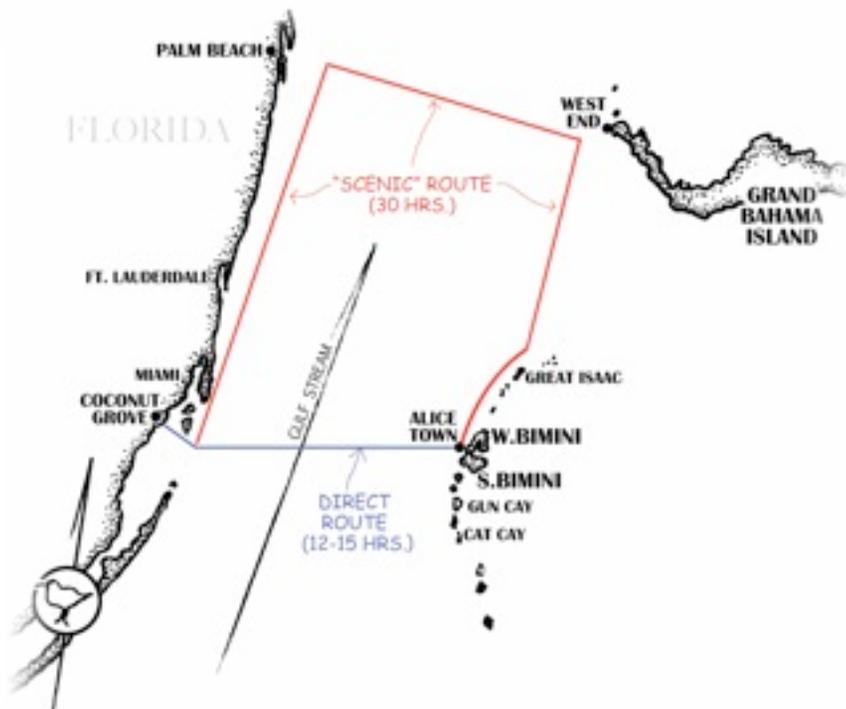


Adventures in the Gulf Stream

by
Perry R. Wilkes

Getting to Bimini

I



It's a warm day in late May, and a light breeze is caressing the rigging. The boat is lying to anchor in Honeymoon Harbor, Gun Cay, the Bahamas. Her bow points steadily into the soft and constant easterly trade winds. Her mast traces a gentle arc across a blue sky as we ride small waves surging endlessly across the vast and shallow Bahama Banks. We are sitting in her cockpit under the Bimini top, leaning back against the gunwales, enjoying ice-cold gin and tonics and watching a fiery red sun sink into the western haze that hugs the edge of an endless ocean.

The sprawling city of Miami is under the sun fifty miles to our west across the restless Gulf Stream. After the last rays of sunset have faded from the sky we will see the loom of Miami reflected all night in the evening clouds. The aero beacon and the lights of Alice Town on the island of Bimini are visible eight miles to the north.

The evening is warm and moist and we can look down through the clearest of water to watch the many small, colorful fish that inhabit this protected anchorage. There is good holding in the sandy, grassy bottom in about fifteen feet of water and we have two 24 lb. Danforths out, both tied to our bow cleats with plenty of rode. They are positioned to keep us from swinging into any of the other three boats sharing this small harbor. We have good protection from the swell of the

Gulf Stream which rolls powerfully and inexorably north just beyond a fringing rim of rocks – part of an ancient coral reef that was uplifted from the seabed. A beautiful white sandy beach arcs across the southern edge of Honeymoon Harbor. In a norther there is no protection here, but this is the end of a gorgeous day in May and northers are extremely rare this time of year. There may not be a more beautiful time or place in the world to be lying at anchor.

So how did we get here? How did we actually manage to find ourselves afloat on a sailboat in Paradise? Well, therein lies a tale indeed.

The ad in the back of Cruising World Magazine said “Easy Sailing – We make sailing a breeze.” I would that it were so.

We had contracted with Easy Sailing for a 1987 Hunter 34, a dinghy with an outboard, and a Captain knowledgeable in celestial navigation to teach us the way from Coconut Grove, Florida to Bimini and how to allow for the powerful tow of the Gulf Stream in the process. The Captain would be with us for two days – adequate time for an overnight crossing and completion of our ASA Certification for Bareboat Chartering. He would then catch the daily seaplane back to Miami, and we would press on to the Berry Islands deep in the Northern Bahamas, confident in our newly-found seafaring skills. We knew that ocean sailing was going to be very different from the lakes we were accustomed to, and we had every desire to be prudent voyagers on our first major adventure on the briny deep.

A week before departure, a representative from Easy Sailing called to tell us the Hunter 34 had been removed from service by its owners and we would be getting a 1984 Hunter 37 instead. No extra charge. The boat was a few years older, but it was bigger. No problem. There would be added room for Carolyn’s daughter Cici, son Jay and his girlfriend Deann, who would be joining us midway through the second week of our cruise.



This was a mistake, but we didn’t realize it at the time. And by this time we had few options available anyway. All five of us had bought our plane tickets, taken time off from work, and made all the other arrangements for a vacation. By now very little of our money was refundable, so we simply hoped this wasn’t going to turn into some nasty bait-and-switch fraud. We decided to give them the benefit of the doubt. We had avoided renting a new boat in the first place to save money. As long as the boat was solid and well maintained, we’d be happy. How bad could it be, anyway?

But when we arrived, the boat was filthy and cockroach infested. Most of our first day was spent cleaning her out and repairing, or attempting to repair, various broken or poorly maintained items aboard. Several hours went to fixing the broken Bimini shade structure and trying unsuccessfully to tighten the rust-covered packing nut at the stuffing box. Eventually, we gave up that battle and concentrated on jury-rigging the bilge pump, which had mysteriously stopped

working during the course of the day. In the end, the stuffing box simply leaked prodigiously throughout our entire trip, but at least we had a rudimentary understanding of the bilge-pumping system and how to get the pump working again.

I was actually somewhat enjoying this opportunity afforded by the boat's poor maintenance to learn some of the workings of a diesel-powered sailboat. Carolyn, however, had expected a somewhat more romantic beginning to a sailing cruise to exotic islands. She hadn't expected to be pressed into cleanup duty on her first day aboard. But to her great credit, she led the way in getting this sad craft in shape for our two weeks aboard, and by the time we left the dock the boat was looking fairly decent, and it wouldn't be a great embarrassment when the kids arrived.

We wanted this to be a special occasion for the kids, and for ourselves, so we provisioned the boat with gourmet organic groceries from a nice little place called Oak Feed in the heart of Coconut Grove. There weren't going to be any cans of Beanie Weenies, or Spam, on this boat. We also loaded several extra containers of drinking water in case there was a problem with the water system, and we laid in an ample supply of good wine. When we left the dock we were satisfied with our own preparations though still a little uneasy about that leaking stuffing box and the probability of other so-far-undiscovered maintenance deficiencies. But we decided to place our trust in those we assumed were more familiar with the ways of the sea.

We left the dock at Dinner Key around 4 pm on Sunday, which was about the time we had originally planned to depart for an overnight passage. Just outside the harbor we motored across the broad waters of Biscayne Bay into very light winds; we would set a course for Bimini when we entered the Florida Strait. This meant we would arrive after the Customs Office opened on Monday morning and avoid after-hours charges. It was common procedure for this passage.

It was a warm and sunny afternoon — a perfect day to be setting out into Biscayne Bay, although the wind was a little light and I wondered idly if it would be sufficient to drive us across the powerful north set of the Gulf Stream when it came time to cut the motor and set our sails. But this was new stuff to me, so I left in the hands of the 'experts.'

Our Captain — let's just call him "Sam" — was forty-ish, very athletic and filled with interesting tidbits about the Bay, the Gulf Stream and other things. But he was more than a little hyperactive and very excitable during any but the simplest, most routine maneuvers. I hoped he'd settle down later as the voyage wore on, and we proved to be knowledgeable and reliable sailors.

We followed a string of buoys across the Bay under power, pausing once to remove an industrial-strength onion bag which

had wrapped itself tightly around our propeller. Sam went over the side with a kitchen knife in his hand, cut the bag away and handed it up to us, and we proceeded a little more quickly on our way. Soon we passed the curious spectacle of a dozen or so stilt-shanties lining a dredged boat channel through the shifting sand bars off Cape Florida. As we threaded our way through the channel, Sam told us that many years



ago, someone in Florida State Government had hatched the idea of selling homesites in the shallower reaches of Biscayne Bay. The subsequent erection of a number of shabby and ungainly architectural atrocities quickly convinced the public this was anything but a good idea, and the dubious practice



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was brought to a halt.

So today we have an odd American Mekong Delta shantytown in the Bay. Although Miami has led a somewhat charmed existence for quite some time, the next hurricane that roars through is expected to re-beautify the area by summarily removing these fabrications, and the owners will not be allowed to rebuild. It will be Mother Nature's reality check on one of humanity's more ridiculous follies.

Soon we were past Cape Florida and we entered the rolling swells of the open ocean. Captain Sam's plan (and ours) had been to set our sails for a port tack southeasterly across the Stream into the constant easterly 12 knot trade winds that would likely reappear soon. This would enable us to counter the strong 5-6 knot northerly current in the middle of the broad Florida Strait, halfway to the islands. The net result, we supposed, would be our sailing almost due easterly to Bimini. It would take us about 12 to 15 hours to cross the 50 mile Strait.

So far, so good.

But after we rounded Cape Florida, Captain Sam decided we should go on starboard tack instead due to the light winds - to go with the current, as it were. Carolyn and I exchanged glances but allowed "local knowledge" to prevail despite the fact we would be swept rapidly to the north and perhaps make very little headway toward the east. We were somewhat dubious that we'd get anywhere near our intended destination this way. It seemed more likely we'd simply be swept along with the Gulf Stream, and our next landfall would be Ireland. But then, we were new at this seafaring business.

Our watch system would consist of two hours at the wheel, two on lookout, and a two hour rest. We agreed I would rest first and be ready for the ten-to-two shift, so at 8 pm I retired leaving Carolyn and Captain Sam to watch a fiery sun as it set over the low-lying Florida Coast. It was decided we would change tacks at 10 pm.

I was awakened at midnight from a fitful sleep. Sam had misread his watch and, now thoroughly exhausted, he went below for a two hour rest. I had hardly slept at all in the forward berth, tossed by the roll of the sea and listening to the constant slap of waves against the bow. In fact I was more than ready to return to the deck. I was as rested as I was going to get, or really needed to be, and I wanted to get on with sailing the boat.

To my surprise, we had kept our original heading, around 70 degrees east-north-easterly, with about two knots of coastwise current adding a lot of northing. I took over the wheel from Carolyn and relaxed in the gentle swell of the sea. Earlier in the evening, Captain Sam had set our sails to balance the helm, so there was little to do but make an occasional adjustment and share the moment quietly with Carolyn as we watched the beauty of starlight flashing on the quiet night waters and the distant lights of a passing ship. We also shared our misgivings about the course we were sailing as the lights of Florida off our port quarter steadfastly refused to

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spend any significant time below the horizon. It just seemed like we should be a lot farther from Florida after this many hours at sea.

As the night wore on, distant stars moved slowly across the sky and were engulfed in the western mist. The lights of various commercial and pleasure craft churned into view and slowly passed across our bow to be swallowed in turn by a new horizon. Waves slapped the hull, slid beneath our keel and quietly hissed in our wake. There is no more tender caress than the kiss of a warm breeze upon the benevolent and life-sustaining sea at night. It was a profoundly quieting and timeless experience.

At 2 am Captain Sam was awakened. He said he recognized the lights now standing off our port quarter as a power station at Palm Beach. This was an interesting development, and it was one which demanded a change of tactics. The island of Bimini, our original destination, lies about 50 miles due east of Cape Florida. We were now about 50 miles north of Cape Florida and maybe a few miles offshore. It was immediately agreed by all aboard that this was an inefficient way to reach Bimini.

III

After realizing we were now actually farther away from our destination than when we started this cruise, Captain Sam ordered a course change to 150 degrees under diesel power, and we, his ready crew, quickly complied. We struck the sails and the night's restful calm was shattered by the return of that low guttural rumble of the engine. Carolyn went below for a much needed rest, and I was left to share the helm with Captain Sam – a most singular experience.

S'funny, you just put two guys together. They don't even know each other. Nothing in common except where they both just happened to be at that particular moment. They start telling each other the damndest lies and the most blatant historical revisions. They reinvent their entire life histories right there. With nobody to contradict them. Life the way it shoulda been, dammit. A string of glorious and memorable triumphs. Not the crappy way it actually had been.

"An' then I told that sonofabitch exactly where to get off!", etc, etc. A string of fantasy, stories of grand and imaginary success, the most extraordinary accounts of chest-beating and sabre rattling. I listened beneath the faint light of stars as Sam told me about all the important things he'd done in his life. How he'd been right and those bastards were wrong. Consistently. How he had insights that could have changed everything for the better, but he was undercut and betrayed by lesser folk. So I wondered as I listened to Sam, with all this success behind him, how come he's 44 years old and doing pickup work for a cut-rate charter outfit on the grimy docks of South Florida? But alas, the answers to certain questions are never revealed to mere mortals, like us. Especially on the midnight watch.

Our new course of 150 degrees pointed us SSE and straight at Bimini (I checked the charts myself this time), and our hull speed of 5 or 6 knots would get us slowly across the Gulf Stream although we'd be constantly fighting being set to the north. It was going to require a long slog diagonally across a contrary current, but at least we were headed somewhat more directly toward our destination now. I settled in behind the wheel for what looked to be a very long haul.

Meanwhile Sam, still feeling considerably groggy, went below again and fell onto the port settee for some shut-eye, and I was left alone to quietly contemplate the beauty of the night sea, to the accompaniment of a rumbling diesel. About 2:30 am, I saw a group of white lights in the distance directly

ahead appearing somewhat like the lights on a couple of buildings, one a little higher than the other. I knew that we were nowhere near land and I tried to remember those light configurations I had seen in the back of Chapman's. This wasn't the sort of thing we see on the inland lakes we normally sail. Maybe they were on an oil rig or something out here, but the Florida Strait is thousands of feet deep and I hadn't seen anything like that on the charts. The lights came slowly but steadily closer, but I still couldn't tell what was happening, or if I needed to take some sort of evasive action. I was enjoying the quiet too much to want to wake up Cap'n Sam, but I sure wished I had studied my Chapman's more closely. My copy was buried somewhere below, and I wondered why there wasn't a copy aboard in a handy spot for reference. Still, I thought it best not to leave the wheel as we drew nearer to this strange apparition.

10 Suddenly, over a wavetop, I thought I saw the flash of a red/green bow light directly below those tall white lights. It quickly disappeared into the sea and I waited tensely for it to rise above the next wave and confirm what I thought I'd seen out there beyond our bow. Then I saw it again, rising over the next crest. Now I could clearly see both the red light and the green one hanging there for just a moment, side by side, and I knew it was about the last thing a sailor on a small boat ever wants to see. Whatever was coming was very big, and the fact that I could see both colors of its bow light indicated that it was headed straight for us! I quickly hauled the wheel over 90 degrees to starboard but the light, now pointed directly at our mid-ships remained steadily red/green. I wished that the engine had more power but we were maxed out at hull speed already while I waited nervously for that light to turn all-red so we could pass safely port-to-port. What a mess we've gotten into already, I thought, on the very first night of our trip. The throbbing diesel pushed us at an agonizingly slow pace out of harm's way - or so I hoped. There was absolutely no reason to

call below and wake up Captain Sam since I really didn't need him on the deck running around and yelling in his usual panicked way. We would either make it or we wouldn't and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. I would holler below in plenty of time to abandon ship, if it came to that.

Finally, the light went all red. I held my course and listened to our throbbing diesel as it slowly pulled us out of harm's way. I wanted to give whoever it was plenty of searoom to avoid any problems with their wake before going back to our original course. And then I watched in awe as a very large barge, pushed by a large tug, passed safely in the night about a hundred yards to port. Its heavy rumbling engine echoed across the water as it passed us by and continued toward a distant dark horizon.

Soon our Captain, now partially revived, joined me once again in the cockpit and he sat quietly scanning a peaceful, untroubled horizon watching the lights from ships passing at great distance from us. Clearly there was nothing for him to worry about above deck. At 6 am, with greatly improved visibility under a lightening sky, I went below and woke Carolyn from a quiet sleep. Then I fell into the v-berth and quickly passed out to the pulse of the diesel and the hiss of the bow wave. Shortly, Carolyn sent the almost-comatose Sam back below as well, and very soon thereafter she enjoyed a quiet and solitary dawn at sea.

IV

A little after 8 am Carolyn called us both on deck. She had sighted fishing boats. We began thinking we might be near Bimini. We chugged slowly by and left the fishing boats behind, pressing onward for another couple of hours without sighting

land. I thought it was more than a little interesting that for most of our time aboard Sam appeared to have little idea of where we were. The boat was equipped with a Loran system, but Sam always changed the subject when I asked about it. At 10 am, a sloop crossed our bow and Sam hailed her on Channel 16. Her skipper said she was three hours out of West End.

Carolyn and I exchanged glances. We had slowly been losing confidence in Captain Sam's navigational abilities, but now the downward process began a rapid acceleration. Having poured over a book of charts back in Albuquerque, I knew we shouldn't be anywhere near West End on this trip. West End is on the western tip of Grand Bahama – the most northerly of the islands – and far to the north of Bimini. I grabbed my hand compass to sight in line with her direction of travel and then calculated the back azimuth. I plotted the course back to her point of departure at about 240 degrees.

12 I went below and charted our position, allowing for the current. I figured that the sloop, and we, were about ten miles out of West End, and that the sloop was probably headed for Miami. According to the chart, we were now almost 50 miles NNE of our destination. We were no closer to Bimini than when we rounded Cape Florida 17 hours earlier, and we were now faced with motoring directly into the current that sweeps through these islands. If we continued this method of navigation we might just end up motoring completely around Bimini at a 50-mile radius and end up back in Miami without ever even seeing the island!

I charted a course of 170 degrees to Great Isaac Light, a rock at the northern tip of the Great Bahama Bank – whereon lies the small and elusive island of Bimini – and Carolyn helmed the boat onto our new course. Sam was not consulted about the decision; in fact, he looked rather relieved that somebody aboard apparently knew how to find Bimini. We may have been losing confidence in Sam, but we were rapidly gaining self-assurance and trust in the abilities of each other.

We figured a passage time, at our speed, and in this current, of about seven hours to Great Isaac. We should arrive off the light at about 5 pm. From there, we would follow a chain of rocks and small islands that curve in a southwesterly arc down to Bimini. At this point, there wasn't much to do but relax and wait until we got there.

Instruction in celestial navigation had been one of our goals on this trip, so at 1130 Sam and I began shooting sun sights on a new Davis Mk 15 plastic sextant I had bought; but shortly before noon, a cloud bank moved in and obscured the sun, ending the exercise. We decided to practice reducing the sights we had managed to obtain, and maybe get a rough idea of our latitude anyway since Sam seemed to have no idea how to operate the Loran the boat was equipped with and it was all new to me. Sam pulled out the worksheets from a celestial navigation class he had taken and attempted mightily to decipher them without constant instructor support.

I watched Captain Sam struggle to fill in the blanks on what looked like an unnecessarily complicated form, pausing now and then to scratch the top of his head whenever he was completely puzzled. Sam is the only person I have ever seen who would literally scratch the top of his head when he was puzzled. With the notable exception of Stan Laurel, of course.

I used the much simpler procedure that came with our Davis sextant, while Sam remained hopelessly mired in his forms, glancing occasionally across the table to see if I was ahead of him. In the end neither of us actually produced any usable numbers, and the whole exercise served only to show how tricky celestial navigation can be.

At 5 pm there was still no sign of Great Isaac, although in the distance we watched two large ore freighters passing in an arc toward the southwest. They were probably heading to the mine on Ocean Cay, far south of our destination. We figured they must be skirting the Bank, and the light had to be there, so we pressed on. I was off watch, asleep below, and Carolyn

was on the helm when the light tower finally appeared dead ahead. We were elated, she and I, even though my time estimate was off by two hours due to my having failed to allow sufficiently for the strength of the Gulf Stream. Although we were well across the swiftest part of the Stream, it still brushes the Banks with a couple of knots of current and is a constant force to be reckoned with.

We changed our course slightly and pushed on in a slow arc to the SSW, skirting Hen and Chickens Rocks and the Moselle Bank, and soon we saw the lights of North Bimini just as the evening sky began to grow dark. We kept an eye on the glowing face of our depth sounder as we skirted the outer edges of the shallowing waters and looked for a good spot to drop anchor for the night. Suddenly wild turbulence and loud thrashing shattered the darkness surrounding us. Questions raced quickly through my mind. What was going on? Were we in a group of uncharted rocks? Had we hit something?

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Sam, now at the wheel, gave a shout of surprised delight when he realized we were being welcomed to Bimini by a pod of dolphins playing in our bow and quarter waves. Two youngsters, each about two to three feet long, leapt repeatedly into the air and fell joyfully back to the surface in loud sprays of water. The five adults squeaked their encouragement at these antics, as they cruised along with us, right beside the cockpit and close enough to touch. They seemed to be trying to make contact with us, to feel the caress of a human hand. They seemed to be saying, "Where have you been? We've been waiting for you. You're late and we were worried." And then, just as suddenly, they were gone.

The phosphorescent eyes of hundreds of small squid glowed in the clear water all around us as we glided slowly over shallowing, sandy, banks just off the shore of the island. After a thirty-hour crossing, and with a lot of unexpected experience under our belts, we had finally made it to Bimini. All we had left to do was drop the anchor.

Bimini Sojourn

I

We eased our chartered boat slowly up to the northwest shoulder of North Bimini Island. The last rays of sunlight had quickly disappeared from the sky and we were suddenly in the deep darkness of a warm sub-tropical night. Our depth sounder ticked off 50 feet, then 40, 30, 20, 10, as we glided further onto the Great Bahama Bank. A brilliant white sand bottom glistened below us through clear water, reflecting starlight from the night sky. Somewhere nearby in the dark were two huge offshore rocks that were clearly marked on the chart. We hoped to anchor on the north side of these rocks with some protection from the constant, rolling surge of the Gulf Stream so we could get a good night's rest.

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"There they are!" shouted Sam, "I've got 'em!"

We had actually come in well south of the rocks, but at this point the shoulder of the island still provided good protection from the constant swell of the Stream, so we decided not to maneuver northward in the dark. We put the engine into neutral and nosed our bow into the warm easterly trade winds. Sam was on the helm and Carolyn and I were at the bow. The boat coasted forward suspended above the white sand bottom, slowed as it eased into the breeze, and came gently to a stop. We heaved our first anchor and backed her down on the wind to the end of the rode where we cleated the line. Her 24 lb. Danforth set well in the sandy bottom.

Then we dropped the second hook. The slapstick that happened next would be typical of many future surprises during our two weeks aboard this poorly-maintained boat. Carolyn and I watched as the ancient, beat-up anchor, with its bent stock and shank, about 6 feet of rusty chain, and maybe eight feet of very ragged line, disappeared over the side into the darkness. The rest of a frayed 5/8" rode lay piled in the anchor locker at our feet. We looked at Sam.

And Sam looked at us, momentarily stunned, frozen with his mouth hanging open like some vaudeville character; then he became hyperactive once again and started yelling. Sam always started yelling when even the smallest thing went wrong. He dashed below and re-emerged with fins, mask, and an underwater light. He seemed well prepared for diving, and he actually appeared to have an aptitude for it – if not for navigation or boat maintenance. While donning his gear, Sam dazzled us with more stories – this time about his diving competence. He assured us that he dove regularly to 20 feet and had a working depth of 40 feet, so the 10 feet we were sitting in shouldn't be a big problem. Neither of us had considered ten feet of water to be much of a problem either, but I guess we were supposed to be reassured by his constant stories.

As Sam prepared to leap heroically over the side, I wondered what else might have been overlooked when they were 'prepping' the boat for our arrival. I was imagining a scenario in which we might be suddenly dependent upon Sam's diving prowess as well as our own – perhaps to retrieve all our belongings when a long-neglected through-hull blew out and the boat settled with a thump onto that sandy bottom lying several feet below our keel. Happily, things never got that bad. The numerous problems confined themselves mainly to the nuisance category. But it was beginning to dawn on us why these guys could rent out boats considerably cheaper than the competition. These weren't just older boats. These were older boats that were badly neglected.

Sam easily found the old, battered anchor lying on the brilliant white sand bottom and attached a small retrieval line to it. We hauled it back aboard and put yet another knot in its badly worn, and oft-repaired, rode that had clearly been due for replacement long ago. Then we set our second hook and the boat rode gently with her bow nuzzled into the caress of the warm and constant trade winds sweeping off the distant Atlantic and over the Bahama Banks.

We were to find out later from the locals it was not considered a good idea to dive in these waters after dark. That's when the sharks come up from deep water and cruise the shallow Banks for fish; later we would hear their prey splashing loudly in the darkness in Alice Town Harbor as they leapt from the water trying to escape. No wonder Sam had looked more than a little tentative and very nervous at the first thought of having to retrieve that anchor in the dark.

At last, we shut off the ignition switch, and for the first time in twenty hours the engine gasped into silence. A warm and gentle breeze whispered in the rigging. The lights of small houses on the nearby shore reflected crystal diamonds across the water. After our marathon 30-hour passage from Florida – a trip which normally takes 12 to 15 hours – we were securely anchored at our destination. After savoring a few quiet moments in the darkness of the cockpit, we went below, and soon each of us had found a place to lie down as we settled willingly into the grip of Morpheus and were quickly consumed by sleep.

We awoke to a brilliant dawn, with the bow of Lady, our 37-foot chartered craft, pointed into the 10-knot easterly trades that pour softly over the island. We were riding gently on a quiet sea with virtually no fetch, and almost no wave action. The long beach just off our bow was the cleanest of whites, with a gemstone turquoise sea caressing her flanks. We seemed to be somewhere very near the neighborhood in which Paradise might even be found.

After an early breakfast at anchor, we partook of the curative powers of Bahamian waters with a crisp dive from the foredeck and long strokes deep beneath a gently undulating surface, coming up with the clean taste of salt water on our lips. The transforming process of cleansing and rejuvenation, essential elements of any successful vacation, had begun. The elements of exploration, adventure, and quiet introspection would come later, and soon enough.

But now it was time to hoist the boat's tattered yellow quarantine flag and power into Alice Town Harbor to clear customs, a day later than we'd planned. We motored several miles south to the entry off South Bimini Island and lined up on two range markers that would lead us through the surf and around a long sand bar into the safe channel to the Harbor. Feeling our way with the depth sounder, we passed over the last of the six-foot shallows and carried 12 to 20 feet all the way to the open slatted wooden docks at Weech's where Jerry, the smiling Bahamian dockmaster, calmly took our lines and

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tied us off, under a needless hail of shouted instructions from Captain Sam. It was clear that Jerry had been through this drill many times before and knew enough to largely ignore the "help" he received from anxious Captains like Sam. Charlie the dock dog looked up briefly from his favorite spot over by the



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piling so see what the yelling was about, then stretched out on the dock to resume sleeping in the island sun.

We completed filling out our customs forms aboard Lady as the strong current of an ebbing tide tugged against our dock lines. After clearing through, we went forward to replace the quarantine flag with the bright new Bahamian courtesy flag we had bought in Florida; but when we went to raise it, the badly worn line leading to the spreaders broke, and the whole affair collapsed onto the deck at our feet. Carolyn and I just looked at each other. We would repair it later with some line we had brought from home, along with a few scraps we found in one of the lockers. Meanwhile, we tied and clothes-pinned the small, brightly-colored flag to the starboard shroud. The repairs could wait. We were finally in Bimini.



II

The island of Bimini is a very relaxed corner of the Caribbean and the people are genuinely friendly. Tourists and fellow Bahamians alike are greeted with a cheerful “Good morning, mon!” In Alice Town there is little evidence of wealth; nor is there evidence of crushing poverty. General maintenance appears to be one of those things which is reasonably – but not overly – attended to. That which needs to get done seems to get done; but as long as there is no pressing need, nobody is ever in a hurry to do it.

There is a timeless and unhurried quality to Alice Town, and one gets the sense that there is time enough here under the warming sun to do many things - even write great novels. Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* was written here, and the first few pages offer a glimpse of the fine and solid house in which it was written and the floury white sand of the beach in front that leads down to the shallow waters of the fringing Banks and the great depths of the Gulf Stream beyond. The Hemingway home is now one of the more popular night spots on the island. (AUTHOR'S NOTE: On the night of Friday, the 13th, January 2006, the hotel housing the Hemingway Museum and the bar where Hemingway hung out, The Compleat Angler, was completely destroyed by fire.)

In Alice Town one can also leave behind the ravages of a life best forgotten. Former Congressman Adam Clayton Powell retired here to escape pending legal problems in New York State. Some say he was facing just retribution for his scandalous ways; but many others say it was the result of simple racism, and harassment by political enemies for his non-mainstream views. Whichever it was, there is now a plaque hanging on the wall of one of the deep-sea fishing clubs

in Bimini commemorating the good works of the late Mr. Powell during his final years living on the island. It is indeed hard to put a value on a small, forgiving, island that can offer the opportunity of a second chance.

Alice Town is wedged between the Harbor and the beach on this long, slender strip of coral and sand rising from the ocean's floor. The town, and hence the island, is about one city block wide, east to west, and several miles long. Carolyn and I left Sam with the boat and walked along a sandy street to the beach on the western shore to again enjoy a swim in those clear, clean waters, and to feel that finely powdered sand between our toes. Then we turned north to explore the shoreline. As we walked along the water's edge a dark shape, about three feet long, paralleled the beach some fifty feet offshore. It appeared to be a zebra ray, or maybe a shark.

After leaving the shore, we walked along quiet, sandy streets under tall palms, and we passed by the City Hall-Post Office-Police Station Building. As we approached, six trim and well-muscled Bahamian men emerged laughing and joking, and got into a white Toyota police mini-van. They were all about thirty years old and they appeared to be long-time friends. Two of them were in handcuffs. As they drove off together laughing, a fine white dust hung momentarily in the air.

In the warmth of afternoon, we stopped for a cold beer at the “End of the World Saloon.” Coral, the large, gregarious proprietor told us, over several tall, frosty mugs, that about 1800 people live on Bimini. And they all know each other. “If you do anything on this island, everybody knows about it!” she complained with a ready smile and a laugh. A slanting ray of sunlight brought out deep rich tones of blue as it shown across her fine black skin.

Smiles come easily here because, generally, life is easy here. “All's you got to do is catch some fish or gather some conchs (pronounced “konks”), and cook ‘em up!” said Coral. “You catch some conch, you eat some conch.”

The sea here is rich and abundant with life. A bumper sticker on one of the very few cars on the road outside her bar reads, "A man who has to work doesn't know how to fish." Other bumper stickers remind fishermen to return small fish to the sea. These are people who very much depend upon the sea.

The End of the World Saloon has a pitched roof with a high vaulted ceiling, thin wooden walls, and a sand floor. People here also call it the Sand Bar. Literally every square inch of the ceiling and walls – inside and out – is covered with graffiti left by the many travelers who have passed through here. And this is despite the fact the entire place was repainted just four months prior to our visit.

On these walls you can find the names of people and their boats from all over the world. Paper money from Jamaica, Australia, Canada, Poland, and beyond is pinned to a wall behind the bar. Various articles of underwear also adorn the rafters. The Sand Bar is a favorite of the rowdy charter-sailboat and dive-boat crews, and a friendly place to down a couple of Kaliks – a very good Bahamian beer. Coral frequently leans her buxom form out the open window, calling and waving to her friends on the boats as they pass by in the Harbor. It's probably the way things were in most other harbors around the world before the ships got too big and the people who sailed them got too hurried to enjoy their lives.

After we finally returned to Lady, Sam suggested an adventure. The plan had been that Sam would leave after we got safely to Bimini, but his suggestion sounded interesting. We shipped our lines and departed Alice Town Harbor for an afternoon sail in the trade winds to a derelict ship lying on the Banks about 5 miles away. In the gathering dusk we approached the Sapona, a ferrocement wreck that rests south of Bimini in an exposed area called Barnett Harbor, a slightly deeper spot between the shoal waters of the Banks. This small freighter, built in the twenties, was thrown onto the Banks by a hurricane and later driven farther on by a second blow which



broke the stern loose. She lies now, in two large pieces, on a sandy bottom in about twenty feet of water with much of her imposing hulk standing well above the waves. She is an ominous presence visible for miles around.

We anchored a hundred yards off in the westward lee of this jagged relic, her ghostly skeleton in many places stripped by wind and water of the side panels which once kept the sea at bay. As the sun set, her naked ribs were bathed in the red-orange of devilfire as if in warning against would-be trespassers. Trespassers like us, for instance. Tomorrow, in the clean and brilliant light of morning, she would appear black and grey and no less forbidding.

After her grounding on the Banks, the Sapona was operated for a while as a casino, and then as a rumrunner's warehouse during Prohibition, and finally as a bombing target during World War II. Today her remains are home to groupers, filefish, sting rays, queen triggerfish, and large schools of other colorful, tropical inhabitants. They stand in waves of silver, gold, and turquoise as the tidal current flows first eastward through the old rusted hulk, and then westward with the

passing of the moon. As we dove through these iridescent clouds of fish they parted effortlessly like water, slid past us, and regrouped in our wake, easily eluding our clumsy attempts to touch them.

At the Sapona, Sam was finally in his element. He was an accomplished and knowledgeable diver who knew the names of far more of the local fish than we could remember. We followed him into the hull of the Sapona, dodging growths of stinging red coral that lined a large, ugly hole in her side. After snorkeling along the surface, we gulped deep breaths of clean ocean air and dove to the bottom for a closer look at the multiple colors of coral, small brilliantly-hued fish, and a grayish ray lying almost hidden among the sand-covered ribs of the disintegrating ship. Each of these residents occupied a special niche in the ecology of this artificial reef, this temporary bit of detritus lying awash on the Bahama Banks. And the endless tide continued its journey through their small corner of the universe as it ebbed and flowed over the rotting bones of the Sapona.

Our visit to the Sapona was interesting and exciting, and we did appreciate the time we spent there. But still, this cruise was intended to be a romantic tropical vacation for Carolyn and me. There was no more need – or room – for Sam on the boat. He'd already been on the boat an extra day, the direct result of his having gotten us lost on the way to Bimini. Later that day, we returned to Alice Town and we watched as a small Chalk's Airline seaplane lifted from the surface of the Harbor with hyper-energetic Sam aboard, and we were glad to see him go. The Bahamas were clearly very different from anything we'd experienced sailing the lakes of New Mexico, but so far we had been confronted with nothing we couldn't handle and we were looking forward to figuring out a few more things for ourselves – without Sam's minimal help. Sam's always-hysterical frontal assault on every minor crisis had usually seemed counter-productive and considerably less efficient than

our own, more analytical, approach. We knew we'd do just fine by ourselves, without him confusing the issues.

And then the whispering wind suggested new adventures to our wandering souls. We gladly shipped our mooring lines, and we were borne once again on gossamer wings slicing

through warm azure seas en route to a new anchorage.

The next week was everything we had hoped for. Our life aboard became a gently unfolding dream-like sequence of soft-focus days spent snorkeling in crystalline waters, and then sailing, under a brilliantly blue sky hung with puff-pastry clouds, to a new anchorage. Gentle trade winds blew a consistent 10 - 15 knots out of the southeast as we tacked



southward to the other islands in the Bimini group. We snorkeled for hours over the white sand bottom of Honeymoon Harbor and walked hand in hand along the beaches of Gun Cay.



26 After docking at Cat Cay Harbor one day, we enjoyed a couple of tall, cold Cat Cay Specials at the open-air quay-side bar and watched a parade of extremely wealthy, pasty-faced people who own those vacation homes tucked under the palm trees on the island. We were told this was a favorite haunt of Richard Nixon and his cronies, but we didn't see anyone we might have recognized from their police photos, and we didn't spend much time checking out the rumor as we had more interesting things to do. After a short walk around we headed back to the boat where we spent the next couple of hours piecing part of a jury-rigged electrical system back together so that we could start the engine and leave. The small harbor, filled with huge luxury yachts and expensive sport-fishing boats — maintained and polished by young, well-tanned and well-muscled crew members — stood in sharp contrast to funky, laid-back Alice Town. The huge yachts crowding the place made our decent-sized boat look like a dinghy. In the end, the whole excessive thing was a bit much for us. We found the simple warmth and cheap pleasures of Alice Town to be much more interesting, and much more believable.

Throughout the rest of our first week we enjoyed cold gin-and-tonics every evening in the cockpit, followed by an elegant summer dinner accompanied by a bottle of good wine as the burning sun slipped below a sea-hazed horizon and yielded slowly to the blackness of night, and the cool light of a star-fire halo filled the sky overhead. Our mornings at anchor began with an early swim in the cleansing waters followed by hot coffee, a light breakfast, and a good book. It was all that we had imagined.

At one anchorage, in the lee of Gun Cay, we watched a schooner reaching eastward across the Bahama Banks and heading to a destination somewhere in the very heart of these islands, and we knew that we'd follow their wake someday. Later that night, the gentle slap of waves against the hull rocked us to sleep. A warm and gentle breeze, laden with the scent of the sea, flowed in through the open forward hatch. A scattering of stars moved across the sky as we swung to our anchor, and soon we were fast asleep in the embrace of yet another quiet tropical night.

And then, sometime deep in the middle of the night, a loud crash shocked us both awake. We leapt quickly out of bed. We had carefully anchored far from the only other boat in the area, and there wasn't enough wind for either of us to drag our anchors. There were no rocks or reefs anywhere near us. We had put two anchors down and we had thoroughly checked both anchors and rodes after that ridiculous incident with a severed line off North Bimini. We raced to the deck and looked around for whatever it was that we had still managed to hit way out here in miles of open shallow water. But we were still anchored where we should have been and there was nothing anywhere near us. We were swinging gently to our anchor, and the other boat was still swinging gently to hers a couple of hundred yards away. Carolyn and I looked at each other.

We had both definitely heard a loud crash in the night, but as we looked around the boat there appeared to be no reason

for it. Everything looked fine. There was no water filling the hold from a shattered hull. There wasn't even a wake from some other boat that might have sideswiped us in the night. We were just rocking gently on the waves as if nothing at all had happened, as if we had only imagined the entire thing. And then I noticed that the steering wheel was lying askew on the sole of the cockpit, wedged between the binnacle and the starboard seat. Its center nut had worked loose and it had crashed into the cockpit sending out a noise that was heard and felt throughout the boat. We looked at each other again and wondered why we happened to be at all surprised at this latest event. We were relieved that at least this particular failure could wait until the light of morning. We sure didn't have any plans to go anywhere in the middle of the night, and I knew I'd be likely to lose some important parts if I tried to fix it now, in the dark. By this time, the name of our charter company, Easy Sailing, had long since morphed into Queasy Sailing. Or Sleazy Sailing. These daily gear failures had become an expected way of life. We just shrugged our shoulders and staggered back to bed.

In the morning, the engine refused to start. In fact, there was no sound at all. I'm not a great electrician, so I looked around for something obvious, like a loose wire, that I could pin the problem on. I came up cold. I thought maybe the battery had somehow gotten drained due to the rats nest of miscellaneous wires dangling in the bilge. It was good that we rarely even wanted to use the engine, but it was really handy docking in the currents back at Alice Town Harbor.

We were a couple of miles from Cat Cay so we hoisted sail in light winds and anchored outside the harbor, as I was leery of trying to maneuver in the tight quarters around those expensive boats. Luckily we had a sailboard with us. I sat carefully balanced on it and Carolyn handed me the battery. I placed it carefully in front of me and paddled my way to shore. I found a guy near the docks who could charge it, and I went

back to the boat for the next hour or so. I swam back in when the battery was ready and he gave me a ride out to the boat. On the way out, he looked into the crystal waters and saw a conch on the bottom about 2 feet below us, so he swerved to scoop it up. Then he saw another one. And another one. Soon the bottom of the boat carried enough of a harvest to make a decent meal of conch fritters. Life's good when the ocean floor is your refrigerator.

Back on the boat the engine still refused to start, but fortunately the 'battery man' climbed aboard to help trace the problem. He found it in an almost inaccessible spot under the settee where two wires were twisted haphazardly around each other and had rattled apart. There was nothing resembling a proper connection associated with much of the wiring that I had seen aboard so far, so this latest development was hardly surprising. We twisted the wires firmly together and wrapped it with some electrical tape we found in a drawer.

It was about this time in the voyage when we found the Ship's Log stuffed in a drawer and we read through the comments left by earlier charterers. Almost all the problems we'd had so far had been mentioned by previous occupants of the boat and then left unattended by the charter company. I wondered if they ever looked at the Ship's Log. But at this point, there was little to do but make the best of it. And what could we have done anyway, sail her back to Florida and leave? The island setting was beautiful and beguiling. We'd get her back to the dock soon enough, and in better shape than when we left for the Bahamas

A couple of days later in Dollar Harbor, a sheltered spot lying at the bottom of South Cat Cay, the tradewinds died completely. Starfish, crabs, small fish, and other sea animals were clearly visible as they moved across a white sandy bottom about 15 feet below a glassine surface. In the still air of early evening, the barely audible sounds of an accordion came to us

across flat waters from the cockpit of the southernmost of the other two boats who shared this anchorage with us. With ice-cold drinks in hand, we sang and hummed along softly to a two-hour concert of old favorites. It would have been a perfect accompaniment to a wedding at any American Legion Hall, but it was also a strangely wonderful serenade to another glowing tropical sunset.

The following morning we met Bob the accordion player, and his wife Mimi, as they pulled their inflatable dinghy alongside us after an early walk on the island. They were the third long-range cruising couple we had the opportunity to talk with during our two-week cruise in the Bahamas.

We had first met David and Liz, a very private and quiet couple in their early forties, a week before in Honeymoon Harbor. They were cruising, and slowly restoring, a Golden Hind 31 – a stout and traditional hard-chined craft built in England of fiberglass over 3/4" plywood. She wore twin bilge keels designed for sitting upright on the English mud flats at low tide. She was a salty-looking and capable craft with a wind-vane on her stern for long passages; and she appeared to be very simply outfitted, yet well equipped for extended cruising.

David and Liz had paid \$25,000 (all the money they had) for her, and they had worked ashore for the money to make her seaworthy. They are now part-time cruisers and full-time liveaboards who dive each morning for their food and spend a lot of their time writing and reading through their well-stocked shipboard library. The shelves behind the settees were lined with large jars of organic grains and the other necessary ingredients for living healthy and well on a budget. By staying away from the very few cities and towns in the Bahamas, and cruising the deserted islands nearby, they had managed to spend only \$900 over the previous six months. They were living an existence that appeared minimal, and was yet rich in priceless experiences and a sense of real freedom. In a few more

months they planned to return to Florida, find jobs again, and finish the task of rebuilding the interior of their boat.

Another couple, named Bill and Linda – he was about 50, she was about 30 – were also anchored nearby in Honeymoon Harbor, and they had managed to spend around \$9,000 in the

five months they'd been cruising. They were happily sailing a brand-new, and expensive, F-27 trimaran they had towed all the way from California. Their high-tech floating hideout was arrayed with all manner of electronics, a watermaker – even a 12-volt refrigerator. They were a well-tanned, handsome, and gregarious pair. They had cashed in on the overheated California real estate market, and they were doing the Bahamas in style.



But as we listened to our new acquaintances, Bob and Mimi, it appeared that they seemed to have found the ideal balance between the bare essentials and the luxuries of life. Bob had quit Sikorsky Aircraft in Connecticut at the age of 50. They sold their home, bought a beautiful 1967 Alberg 37, and invested the rest of the money. Now they live on \$6000 a year, play the accordion in deserted Bahamian anchorages during the winter, and sail their boat north during hurricane season. They tie her to a dock in Connecticut during the summer months and spend a lot of very good time with their kids.

“We do to the kids what they used to do to us when they were in college.” Bob laughed. “We call and tell them to get the car gassed up. We’ll pick up the keys when we get to town!”

Probably anyone who sails, but certainly anyone who charters in the Caribbean, dreams of finding the ideal yacht, making a break for it, and cutting all those troublesome shore ties – at least for a while. Certainly on this trip we were expecting to educate ourselves to the possibilities for long-range cruising and we had a lot of questions that needed answers. What kind of boat would be best for us? What kind of gear would we need? How easy was it, realistically, to gather food from the sea?

Early in the charter we realized the boat we were on really wouldn’t cut it for us. She’d never be a stout ocean crosser, like an Alberg 37 or a Golden Hind 31. At her best, she was a competent coastal cruiser, and she was a long way from being at her best. Poor maintenance always has its consequences, and as a result of years of basic neglect Lady, our chartered boat, had become a very tired and dirty old lady. And not too many days ever went by that we weren’t reminded of it.

The day after Sam left, we discovered that the 2-hp outboard for the inflatable dinghy (for which we’d paid extra) was frozen up solid from corrosion and we were unable to free it for the rest of the week. After a day or so of looking at it hanging on the stern rail, I finally removed the spark plug, squirted WD-40 into the hole, put the plug back in, and waited. Each day I’d pull on the starter cord and get no results, so I’d spray in a little more juice. It became a challenge as I waited for the kerosene in the WD-40 to start working. And waited. On the second to last day of our ‘alone time’ on the boat, it finally broke free and I was able to start it, but by that time we had very little confidence in the thing anyway. We came to the conclusion that it was probably just as well that it wasn’t reliable when we realized the dinghy we were towing was really very little more than a toy and not a fit

vehicle for exploring the reefs in these often-swift and tricky currents. It also became clear that in an emergency we were effectively out here by ourselves on a broad ocean without any kind of real life raft.

We had hoped to offer the kids, our guests, something better than this, but we were stuck with what we had. They would be arriving soon at the little airport at Alice Town, and we needed to forget about that pitiful outboard and dinghy. We needed to think about getting back to the dock at Weech’s to pick them up.

Re-Crossing the Stream

I

On Tuesday morning of the second week of our cruise, the wind picked up again, from the southwest this time, and blessed us with a glorious broad reach under clear, sparkling skies as we left Dollar Harbor and headed north along the western edge of the Bimini chain to Alice Town. But a wind shift like this — away from the usual pattern of prevailing easterly trades — usually portends a major weather change of some kind. And it wasn't long in coming. The morning after our return to Alice Town we sat on a bench at the tiny airport under dripping and darkening skies, awaiting the arrival of our guests. The change in the weather had been quick and ominous.

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Cool, rainy weather had arrived on the very day we were expecting the arrival of Carolyn's two kids. Her daughter Cici was coming in from Brooklyn. She would arrive soon on the morning seaplane out of Miami. Son Jay and his girlfriend, Deann, were due on the afternoon flight.

Cici is a senior pursuing a degree in "Social Change" at Hunter College in Manhattan, but she lives in Brooklyn where the rents are affordable and the people are interesting. She is a curious and worldly young woman who managed to buy herself a ticket to Europe at the age of eighteen. By the time she was twenty, she had returned to make her home in The Big Apple. After the tiny seaplane landed in the choppy harbor at Bimini

and she stepped onto dry land, Cici immediately fell in love with the ethnic soul of the Bahamas, and the funky charm of this little corner of the Third World. We took a short walk through sandy streets, past weathered and decrepit buildings, and stopped for conch fritters and beer at a tiny cafe. Cici was in her element here.

Jay runs a nightclub in Arlington, Texas. Both Jay and Cici were born in Puerto Rico and lived in Peru before coming to the States with their parents. Spanish was their first language. Jay was four years old when he finally set foot in the United States; Cici was six. Jay has traveled widely in the US and Canada. His quiet intelligence as well as his good looks and bodybuilder's physique mean that most people take a second look when he walks by. His girlfriend Deann is Texas born and bred. She is petite and attractive with penetrating eyes and a wealth of curly brunette hair. She is not widely traveled.

Carolyn and Cici and I were ashore watching as the plane carrying Jay and Deann landed in the harbor, pulled across the boat channel, and chugged toward shore. As it crawled up the ramp onto dry land, its wings rocked back and forth giving it the ungainly look of a pelican walking on the beach. It wheeled around and pulled to a stop. We waved to Jay as he stepped, smiling, from the plane and walked toward the small customs building. Deann, however, emerged with the tentative and stunned look of a captive animal being released into a strange environment. Carolyn and I exchanged worried glances.

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After they cleared Customs we left the airport and stowed everyone's gear aboard the boat. There was a brief lull in the weather, and we decided it was a good time to take another walk around Alice Town. Deann walked quietly, her large eyes flickering from the peeling paint of one funky building to the undermined foundation of another. This was the first time we had met Deann and it was her, and Jay's, first encounter with a sailboat. A 37-foot sailboat is a small space for five people to spend a lot of time in — especially if one of them is your



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prospective mother-in-law. We only hoped they would all handle it well. We wanted this to be a special vacation for the kids, but we began to fear that Deann had expected something a little more elegant. We decided to leave the populated area behind and walk onward to those bright white sand beaches on the ocean side of the island.

On the beach, Jay and I stripped off shirts and shoes and dove into the warm salty waters licking the clean whiteness of the shore. Carolyn, Cici, and Deann walked along the beach talking quietly and feeling the soft, floury sand between their toes. In the evening we had dinner at an up-scale place – for Bimini – called the Anchorage, and later we retired to the boat. The rain returned in force just as we ducked under the cockpit cover and scrambled below.

We were tied to the dock next to a couple of rowdy scuba boats. Between wind squalls and the staccato drumming of raindrops on the cabintop, the scuba crews entertained the entire marina with loud, cacophonous music and outbursts of maniacal laughter. “Well, kids,” I thought to myself as I lay on the forward bunk attempting to sleep, “Welcome to Bimini.”

In the morning we topped up our tanks with diesel fuel and potable water at the nearby Bluewater Club sportfishing dock before stealing out of Alice Town Harbor in a light drizzle. The scuba boats were finally quiet in the grey light of dawn. Only two members of the crew were topside, moving very slowly, looking like they needed more aspirin and a few more hours of sleep to dull the pain of their massive hangovers.

Once outside the channel and past the entry bar, we hoisted our mainsail and unfurled the genoa under grey, lowering skies. A decent breeze filled our sails and the sound of our bow wave brought a sense of completion to the morning. We were pointed south toward Honeymoon Harbor, at the upper tip of Gun Cay.

Almost immediately a squall line hit. We were quickly going to have to reel in part of the jenny and to shorten that ragged mainsail before it blew out completely. The wind howled in from the southwest, bringing with it a driving, pelting rain. We were all quickly soaked to the skin. We put Jay on the wheel as Carolyn and I lashed ourselves to the boat with our safety harnesses and went forward to wrestle down the main with its torn reef cringle and missing reef points. As our bow crested the oncoming waves and plunged deeply into the troughs, I held on with one hand and wiped wet hair and rain out of my eyes with the other while I tied down the ragged reefing lines and just hoped they would hold. The boom swung violently back and forth, and the mainsail flapped wildly in the screaming wind. Whitecapped waves were building higher and were breaking loudly all around us.

Cici and Deann clung tightly to the lifelines trying to dodge the spray and the rain. Jay watched us sliding around on the cabintop struggling with the sail. He glanced repeatedly over his shoulder at the low island of Bimini as it receded in our wake and we headed further into the storm.

“Shouldn’t we be heading in the other direction?” he finally asked.

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Three enlarged pairs of eyes stared out from under the Bimini top at Carolyn and me, and waited for an answer. We must have looked like two drowning rats struggling to stay on a slippery crate in a hurricane. Summoning as much credibility as we could manage under the circumstances, we told them we had everything under control.

The disbelief was palpable in their eyes.

Fortunately for us Jay had begun to feel queasy and, at our suggestion, he went below to lie down. How many mutinies, I wondered, have been averted by the divine intercession of seasickness? The squall line soon passed over and left us with moderate winds under a drizzly sky on our way to Honeymoon Harbor. Our passengers relaxed a little and tried to enjoy the rest of the passage.

On our arrival, that long white arcing beach still looked inviting, even under grey skies. We set both anchors, had a light lunch, and spent the rest of the afternoon snorkeling and beach walking during breaks in the weather. Jay, Deann and Cici dove for conch shells, tried board sailing, and did their best to enjoy their rainy vacation.

Meanwhile, Carolyn and I tidied up the boat and kept an ear to the NOAA weather channel. Our plan had been to spend a sunny couple of days playing around the islands, followed by a Friday night passage back to Florida across the Gulf Stream beneath a star-filled sky. We would arrive in the breaking daylight of a glorious dawn with the sun and the trade winds at our backs. The nasty weather which had arrived unexpectedly was not part of this plan. Maybe it would blow on out of the Bahamas quickly and leave a little sunshine in its wake.

But the dismal weather reports droned on doggedly: there was a large low-pressure system centered over Florida, winds 10-15 knots with moderate seas from Key West to Government Cut, gusting higher near the frequent rain squalls; there was a similar report from Lake Worth Inlet; there were moderate winds and rain squalls at Miami International

Airport. The bad weather we were getting was just part of a very large, very wet system which had been moving slowly across Florida and toward the Bahamas. For the next several days we were just going to get more of the same. It was nothing to worry about but it wasn't going to make for a wonderful vacation.

Then we heard some news that changed everything.

Late in the afternoon, NOAA slipped a new report into their running narrative. There was a large tropical depression developing over the ocean southwest of Cuba.

In summer, when the tropical ocean warms, rising hot air from the surface forms huge whirling vortices, or depressions, as the air spins inward and upward into the atmosphere. If the water gets warm enough, these rotating systems gain sufficient windspeed to be classified as tropical storms, or even hurricanes. The tropical storm/hurricane season officially begins on the first of June, so we had carefully planned our trip for the last two weeks in May. Carolyn and I had discussed the possibility that the trend toward global warming might lengthen this year's hurricane season, but we thought it was worth the gamble. Now we were faced with the first large storm of the season arriving far earlier than we'd expected.



The kids were still off swimming as we sat down to discuss this latest development. We decided to wait for further reports on the windspeed and direction the storm was traveling before we planned our next move. Maybe it would turn toward the mainland and we wouldn't have to worry anyone unnecessarily about it.

But later reports confirmed the storm was strengthening and moving north at 5-10 knots. It was expected to inundate western Cuba with torrential rains in the evening, and then slowly veer toward the northeast.

It was coming our way!

II

Carolyn looked near to tears. Things were not turning out as we had planned. Jay, Deann, and Cici had all arranged their vacation schedules and limited finances to be with us aboard a fine yacht cruising to adventures among sun-baked tropical isles. As it was, our chartered sailing vessel was a faded and ill-kempt ugly duckling that creaked and groaned ominously at night, and whose dormitory sleeping arrangements were far less romantic than our guests might have expected. The sun hadn't shown once on those highly-touted warm, sunny, white beaches since their arrival; and now there was some kind of dangerous storm, or maybe a *hurricane*, coming!

We had carefully planned this trip for May because there was little likelihood of severe weather at that time of the year. It had seemed like a very responsible decision. But now it looked like just one more screwup on our part. At any rate, we weren't blessed with a whole lot of extra time for regrets about

this latest problem. We had to come up with some kind of plan to deal with it. And the sooner, the better.

I got out our charts and used the coordinates that had been given over the radio to plot the center of the storm about 300 miles west and 360 miles south of our position. We had intended to hang out on the beach and leave late Friday for an overnight passage back to Florida. It was now Thursday morning and, at the speed the storm was traveling, it would be 240 miles closer to us by Friday night. Meanwhile, during the afternoon, the winds had shifted back to the southeast and had strengthened. We were already in the outer grip of this huge counter-clockwise rotating weather system, but at least the winds were now going our way.

As best we could judge, it seemed wisest to leave early on Friday morning and take what would certainly be an exhilarating broad reach back across the Gulf Stream to Coconut Grove. With the wind back in the southeast, the seas would be large and breaking, but not particularly dangerous. At least we wouldn't be faced with a hard northerly blowing against the current creating steep and deadly waves in the middle of the Stream, as might happen if we waited and caught the trailing winds after the center of the storm passed over us. We reasoned that a daylight passage would also be less terrifying for our guests amid the inevitable groaning of the boat, the snapping sounds of canvas, and the roar of wind and sea. And we would be able to gauge the following seas more accurately in daylight, and be better prepared for them.

The kids were still out swimming or walking on the beach and oblivious to this new drama, so Carolyn grabbed our copy of Chapman's and worked out a force triangle that included our best guess at the average wind speed of the storm and our probable hull speed, and with sufficient southing to allow for the northerly set of the current. She took her time with the calculations, carefully checking and rechecking her figures. If the numbers were right, we would lay Cape Florida on a course

of 250 degrees. I looked it over with her and it made sense to me. At this point, we were about as ready as we could get. We would tell the kids all about these new developments over dinner.

In the late afternoon, with everyone back aboard and gathered around the dinner table, we listened to another dismal NOAA weather broadcast. It was time to brief the crew. It would be a rough passage, we told them, but not dangerous or life-threatening. There was nothing to worry about, we said, in our best – and calmest – “adult” voices.

Cici, Jay, and Deann sat erect and listened intently as we spoke, their wide open eyes and sober expressions showing the gravity with which they contemplated this latest upcoming adventure. There were few questions, but Deann looked especially sober at the news. After a hot meal and some futile conversational attempts at relaxation and morale-building, everyone retired early and restlessly awaited morning as the wind moaned in the rigging high overhead and waves brushed the hull.

Around midnight, there was a loud crash in the cockpit that reverberated throughout the boat. This latest noise was followed by worried whispers among the crew, who were bedded down in the salon. I rolled over in the forward berth and I could see them all sitting bolt upright and silhouetted against the night sky as it glowed through the open companionway door. “Don’t worry about that!” I called reassuringly from the forward cabin. “It’s only the steering wheel falling off the binnacle, again!”

In the early dawn, Carolyn and I lay awake in the forward berth staring at patterns in the fiberglass overhead and listening to the wind outside. We needed to discuss our options one more time.

Should we attempt the crossing at all? We had other people’s lives in our hands, now. The reefing system on the mainsail had problems, and the sail itself wasn’t in the best of

condition. We didn’t have a safe liferaft in case something went terribly wrong out there in the Gulf Stream. We could just sail the boat back up to Bimini, tie it to a dock and fly out on the next seaplane. Let those irresponsible bastards at Easy Sailing pick up their own damn boat and take it back to Coconut Grove in time for the next victims to board!

Still, the hull was sound. She tracked well close-hauled, on the beam, or on a reach. The diesel, except for that one episode with a loose wire connection, had proven itself reliable. The winds, so far, were only 20-25 knots, they were with the current, and we had been through much heavier stuff in a much smaller boat – even if only on our favorite lake. If we stayed much longer in Honeymoon Harbor, the wind would inevitably back as the storm moved past us and we would be caught in a strong northerly at the tail-end of it. In this anchorage, we were completely exposed to the north. In a northerly, that beautiful arc of white sand beach just to our south would become a hungry, grasping, churning, lee shore.

From where we lay anchored we could see past the fringing rocks and well out into the Gulf Stream. It was going to be an exciting passage back to Florida but, so far, it just didn’t look dangerous out there. The waves were breaking but they weren’t steep. They would undoubtedly be larger, but not steeper, in the middle of the Stream, and we thought we could handle the boat in those conditions. We decided to go for it.

We had a quick breakfast, and at 7:30 am, Carolyn and Jay went forward to haul the anchors. We would pick up the southerly one that lay closest to the beach first, then swing onto the northerly one and pick it up as we went past, then we’d blow past the reef and into the Stream as we unfurled our jib and then set the mainsail.

Jay has been a weightlifter for many years now. He weighs about 220 lbs and most of it is muscle. He pulled steadily and powerfully on the rode till a hard gust took the bow and sent the line ripping and burning through his fingers. He stood there,

momentarily stunned by the sheer raw power of the elements we were facing. We decided to take the anchors up under power for the first time on our cruise through the islands. As we boarded the second anchor, the wind gripped the bow again and swung her round to the west as the diesel pushed us out of the harbor. Just beyond the exposed edge of the reef, we set both sails into a strong quartering wind from the southeast, and killed the diesel. Next stop: Coconut Grove, Florida.

I hooked on my safety tether and went forward. The mainsail flailed loudly in the heavy wind as I cranked it into the air from my perch at the base of the mast. We unrolled the jib from the roller furling rig and both sails filled as Carolyn bore off with the wind and I cleated the main halyard. The boat leapt forward, crested a wave and plunged into the trough and I felt my safety harness snug me back onto the deck. But I had stupidly left the winch handle unattended for just a moment and it quickly popped out of the mast winch, bounced once off the side deck, and bounded into the sea. It was the only one we had aboard, and I felt an almost overwhelming urge to dive after it. Without it, adjusting the sails would be damned difficult, if not impossible, in this wind. I leaned hard against my harness as I watched that spot where the handle had disappeared recede rapidly in our wake.

I took the first watch at the helm, until 10 am, in order to get the feel of the boat. It was the beginning of a process we would call "Championship Wheel Wrestling." Because of the amount of work and concentration involved in steering the boat under full canvas, Carolyn and I agreed to take one-hour watches at the helm. The waves marched up in endless ranks from the southeast, each one swatting our stern on the port quarter and pushing us semi-broadside to the wind. As each wave passed under us, I muscled the bow back off the wind, trying not to overcorrect and gibe the main across, which we had tied off with a preventer to a starboard stanchion base. I knew that in a gibe, the tremendous pressures on the

mainsail might well dismast the boat. Then our problems would really begin.

As we struggled with the wheel, I thought back over our decisions and kept running them through my mind: we were carrying too much mainsail and should have shortened down. But because of the poor condition of the reefing system, with its missing reefing points and torn cringle area – and now the missing winch handle – we had decided to leave things as they were and just wrestle the wheel instead. Traveling our plotted course of 250 degrees effectively meant struggling to keep her nose between about 230 and 270 degrees.

As we moved rapidly offshore, the kids cast wistful glances at that island we were leaving in our wake. We could read in their eyes that they sure hoped we had made the right decision. Carolyn and I each glanced over our shoulders at the low-lying island, and then we looked at each other. We were sure we had made the right decision, but it just might not look like it for a while yet.

The waves got larger as we left the protection of the Bahama Banks, and I was glad I'd taken a Bonine upon rising. I don't get seasick easily, but we felt it best not to take chances with either Carolyn or me being incapacitated during the passage. Jay and Deann had taken pills as well; but Carolyn declined because they make her dopey, and she doesn't ever get seasick anyway. Cici thought that she, too, would be fine without them.

But medication or no, Cici, Jay, and Deann were all early casualties. Deann was so terrified by the experience that she stayed in bed in her nightgown for the entire crossing. Jay soon became queasy and stayed below, trying to comfort Deann. Each time the boat leapt forward off a wavetop and crashed loudly into the trough 10 feet below, Deann let out a frightened yelp. Some 30 minutes into the trip, Cici fell silent and stared at the horizon. She had started feeling a little queasy and decided maybe she ought to have a Bonine afterall.

But it was too late. She quickly erupted into a sickness of Olympian proportions, certain that she would never recover. After she had spent considerable time worshipping at the leeward rail and was too weak to go below, we covered her with a pile of blankets and tucked her in for the duration. Ah, another fun and memorable vacation with mom!

Carolyn and I continued to be haunted by the collective, silent look of horror in the kids' eyes as they watched dry land disappear in our wake and we headed for the even larger seas which awaited us in the center of the Gulf Stream. So far, on this vacation in Paradise, our three young guests had been promised much relaxation and enjoyment, with little having actually been delivered.

Every hour on the hour we checked the Loran — for what it was worth — and entered the coordinates into a log we kept for the crossing. Sam had never shown us how the damn thing worked, and I finally had my doubts as to whether he even knew how to operate it at all. At about this point in the trip we began to refer to him, wryly, as Sam the Navigator.

There was no instruction booklet aboard for the Loran so we had no idea how to adjust the thing, this being our first encounter with electronic navigation. However, we had occasionally compared its readings with our actual, charted positions while we were cruising the islands and we had noticed it always seemed to read our position as a couple of miles to the north. Okay, we thought, that's good enough. We can probably interpolate our position from the readings — at the rifle range it's called "Kentucky windage." If this thing can get us to within a few miles of our destination, we can probably figure it out from there.

During the crossing, the Loran served mostly as a morale booster, as it showed we were maintaining a more-or-less steady latitude and making considerable westward progress toward Florida. Within a couple of hours, we had ticked off

twelve miles, then nineteen, and soon we were in the middle of the Gulf Stream.

The windspeed increased to 30 knots steady, with gusts into the upper 30s. Then it briefly dropped to 20, but soon rose again to 30 or so and stayed there. The seas became larger, near 15 feet, and they broke heavily and loudly around us. Out here we were thankful, once again, that the wind was southeasterly and with the current. On this, our first solo crossing, we had no desire to face those steep and dangerous seas created when the wind blows against this current.

A good friend had told us of his experiences on a sailing race long ago from Miami to Nassau. On the morning of the race, a norther swept into the Florida Strait creating tall, vertical waves. But those races begin on schedule, regardless of the weather. It was impressive, he said, crewing aboard a fast 50-footer that was shooting — free-falling, really — off steep 30-foot breakers. On one of the other competing lightweight sleds, the leeward shrouds began to go slack. As the crew worked to tighten and adjust the rig, they noticed a lot of water below. Suddenly, they realized their heavy mast was punching a hole in the bottom of the boat. Fortunately, the crew was rescued shortly before the boat slipped forever beneath the turbulent surface and disappeared into the Florida Trench. For us it was not a comforting thought, and once again we were glad this wind was with the current.

About 2:30 in the afternoon, Carolyn said she saw buildings. Cici, at this hint of dry land, perked up considerably and experienced a miraculous recovery from her morbid condition. As she sat up, she expectantly followed her mother's gaze off the starboard bow. Jay and Deann also showed signs of life and peeked out the hatchway. I looked dubiously at Carolyn. Buildings? Out here in the ocean? Was she getting delirious from the strain?

But then, slowly, they came into focus on the misty horizon. There they were, the skyscrapers of Miami Beach,

almost hidden in the haze. Carolyn is wonderfully far-sighted and I don't call her "Hawkeye" for nothing.

Soon we spotted what appeared to be a tower, or some kind of derrick structure, far ahead and directly on our course. The Loran showed us closing, quickly and inexorably, with the coast at Key Biscayne a couple of miles north of Cape Florida. We figured the tower must be resting on some low-lying, unseen shore, and we began to make some southing to find the dredged channel we had followed on leaving Biscayne Bay two weeks earlier. We still didn't trust our abilities with the Loran that we didn't even know how to operate, and we weren't really very sure of our position.

48 Suddenly the water started getting shallow, and the pale aquamarine color of shoal water began to replace the rich, deep blues of the Gulf Stream. Readings of 50 feet, then 40, 30, 20, 10 appeared on the depth sounder screen. The boat drafted four feet, but the transducer was two feet below the waterline; theoretically, as long as the screen showed at least two feet in the troughs, we were fine. But we didn't want to push our luck, and things were already getting a little too close for comfort.

Then Carolyn spotted Fowey Rocks to the south of us. We also picked up several channel markers to the north. And there, barely visible in the haze farther north, was Cape Florida. The tower we had passed was actually the entrance marker to Biscayne Bay — the one we had passed on leaving, but had forgotten. We had nailed it perfectly and not even realized it! Carolyn had plotted a perfect course across the Stream. The Loran, however, was still showing our position to be several miles to the north — presumably in the lobby of one of those Miami Beach hotels.

We had to alter course quickly and go straight north to avoid the shallows looming just to our west. So we were faced with the unpleasant prospect of gybing or, preferably, tacking through 270 degrees, all without the benefit of the winch

handle that was now lying 50 miles east of us on the edge of the Bahama Banks in about 100 feet of water. We decided to roll up the genny, furl the main, and motor toward the channel and then across Biscayne Bay to the Marina. This had the further advantage of calming our crew, who would no longer have to endure the heel of the boat, and listen to those unfamiliar snapping and cracking sounds of the sails.

Unfortunately, this maneuver also put us parallel to the wave train and, without the stabilizing effect of the sails, it resulted in a violent pitching motion as we slowly motored out of shallow water and north to the channel. By this time, however, with dry land firmly in view, none of the crew showed any further signs of seasickness. Jay, in fact, pulled on his best, dry, goin' ashore clothes and joined us in the cockpit just shortly before we were boarded by two large, and very sloppy, breaking waves. After the second wave thoroughly drenched his fresh attire with sticky, slimy, saltwater he leapt to his feet and muttered, "Oh, man!" through clenched teeth, with an "I just wanna punch something, or somebody!" look on his face. But he gazed around the cockpit at the rest of the bedraggled and half-drowned-looking crew still wrapped sensibly in their foul-weather gear, and he grudgingly allowed a half-smile as he realized that, unfortunately, this miserable vacation wasn't over yet. In fact, we were still a couple of hours from the dock.

We plodded slowly back through the winding channel to the throbbing accompaniment of the diesel, crossed Biscayne Bay, and motored past the fleet of offshore liveaboards permanently anchored outside the Dinner Key breakwater. As we neared the Easy Sailing slips and began to maneuver for docking, we saw Captain Sam on the dock. From the moment he became aware of our approach, he began his usual routine of shouting and waving his arms for proper emphasis in order to guide us to the correct slip.

The volume of Sam's voice had always increased dramatically whenever we approached any dock while he was

with us in the Bahamas. At least now it made him easy to hear above a howling crosswind that was blowing over our starboard rail as we drew closer to the pier. Unfortunately, he was also filled with admonitions against whatever action we took to bring the boat in safely.

Jay, who is very smart and a good hand in a tight situation, was reduced to standing there looking at Sam yelling one confusing order after another and wondering just what the hell it was that he actually wanted us to do. The only sensible way of handling Sam was to simply ignore him and do whatever needed to be done at the moment. At any rate, we brought her safely into the slip where she finally lay peacefully tied to her pilings after a nine-hour voyage from Honeymoon Harbor – a respectable passage by anyone’s standard.

But the adventure was not over yet. Deann, still in her nightgown, had been peeking from the passageway to the salon as we maneuvered the boat into the slip. Now that we were safely tied to the pilings, she scampered into the cockpit, ran up the side deck, and climbed over the bow pulpit to the dock and the safety of the adjacent grassy strip by the roadway. She stood there in the grass, on relatively dry land and a safe distance from the boat, with the wind and drizzle ruffling her lace nightgown while cars filled with people heading to dinner at a nearby restaurant drove slowly past and stared at this spectacle.

I was too exhausted, drenched, and preoccupied with boat chores to want to pay much attention to this new drama; but it was clearly something we had to deal with. Jay was immediately thrust into the role of diplomat. He ran after her, and stood talking in the rain with Deann firmly shaking her head and glancing back occasionally at the accursed boat – the source of all her recent misery. Meanwhile, those of us still aboard agreed it would be best if Jay and Deann spent the night ashore in a dry hotel rather than continue to camp out in these cramped, slightly smelly, and now completely

disheveled, quarters. It had been a rough passage – and one that could be especially terrifying to anyone completely unfamiliar with the ways of boats and the sea.

However, we had the immediate problem of getting Deann back aboard, dressed, and presentable. It required careful and protracted negotiations. Jay became engaged in a process of shuttle diplomacy between the boat and the dock, and eventually we arrived at the heart of the problem. A successful resolution depended upon Deann’s being able to operate her hairdryer. She had expected a special vacation with Jay on a yacht in the tropics, and now we had her looking like some refugee from a concentration camp. As a further measure of our complete insensitivity, Carolyn, Cici, and I actually thought her wind-blown hair looked great!

We immediately dug a shore power cord out of the settee locker and pressed it into service, and soon the soothing shriek of a hairdryer and the scent of perfumed potions filled the boat. Waves of anxiety and general discomfort lifted from our shoulders as we each enjoyed a hot shower aboard and a fresh change of dry – if somewhat wrinkled – clothing. Afterward, we walked across the parking lot through lingering droplets of rain and enjoyed a delicious Caribbean dinner at The Havana Clipper, a superb Cuban restaurant named for one of the seaplanes that were based here in the 1930s to provide air service throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. All thoughts of seasickness had been left at the dock, and we were all ravenously hungry.

As daylight receded from the cloudy skies over Dinner Key, our spirits were rejuvenated by an assortment of rum-based drinks and hot, savory meals. As I scanned the laughing faces around our table, and listened to the recounting of adventures, I saw a very tired but very happy crew. Things which had been terribly important just hours ago, no longer seemed to matter. We had learned much about the perils and pitfalls of bareboat chartering, and about our own abilities to cope with a variety

of interesting situations. And we knew we'd do things a lot better the next time around. We had confronted numerous challenges and we had prevailed, both individually and as a group.

This had been our first solo saltwater passage — and in a tropical storm, no less. Yet we had done it, and we had done it well!